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An Assessment of the Abortive Iraqi Coup of June 30, 1973

The attempted coup in Iraq of June 30, 1973 appears to have resulted from a political split within the ruling Ba'th party. While strong elements of personal rivalry are one aspect of the split, it also can be described as a conflict between pragmatists and ideologues over Iraq's future international alignment -- the former desirous of ending Iraq's virtual isolation from the West, and the latter seeking to align the country more closely with the Soviet Union. Vice President Saddam Husayn at-Tikriti and President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, whose positions have been strengthened in the wake of the abortive coup, appear to be in the pragmatist camp.

According to the official Iraqi explanation of the attempted coup, plotting began about six months earlier and coincided with a crucial stage in the negotiations between the Iraqi government and a western-owned petroleum company over the issue of nationalization. Saddam Husayn, with the support of President Bakr, was seeking a compromise settlement with the oil company which would greatly increase oil revenue and thus enable Iraq to gain access to the Western technology needed to carry out the regime's ambitious plans for economic development. The most powerful opponent of a settlement at that time was 'Abd al-Khaliq as-Samarra'i, the leading Ba'thi ideologue and former Vice President of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). The regime subsequently identified Samarra'i as the mastermind behind the coup plot. He has been sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor. The apparent instrument for carrying out the coup was a young Colonel, Nazim Kazzar, then the Director of Public Security. He and 35 others have been executed.

Supporting the interpretation that the coup was an outgrowth of an ideological struggle are reports that the Soviet Union had been urging Iraq not to reach a settlement with the foreign oil company. It is believed that Bakr and Saddam Husayn signed a secret protocol to the April 1972 Iraqi-Soviet Friendship Treaty early in 1973 during their visit to Moscow. In this protocol, the Soviet Union promised political, economic, and military assistance to Iraq if it were attacked by one of its neighbors. In return, the Soviets asked Iraq to settle the Kurdish problem and establish a national front government that would include representatives of the Iraqi Communist Party and of the Kurdish Democratic Party.

The Soviet Union was also seeking to conclude a massive oil barter deal with Iraq that would have tied the country's economic future much more tightly to the Soviet camp. A March 1, 1973 settlement with the foreign oil company reflected a decision by the RCC not to tie Iraq's future to the Soviet bloc but to seek an economic and commercial opening to the West. Subsequently, the Government has taken a number of other strongly nationalist steps including a decision not to enter into any more barter agreements for Iraqi oil, to the consternation of the Soviet Union.

In the wake of the coup attempt, Saddam Husayn and Bakr have purged the security forces and the army of followers of Samarra'i and Colonel Kazzar. The purge, however, has not eliminated opposition to the pragmatic leadership of Bakr and Saddam Husayn. A series of brutal murders during the past few weeks have terrorized Baghdad. These have been directed in part against persons associated with Saddam Husayn. The internal situation in Iraq remains very unsettled, and the struggle for power within the Ba'th Party has not abated. Nevertheless, Bakr and Saddam Husayn have been able to pursue their policy of expanding economic relations with the West and rapprochement with Iraq's neighbors, including Iran.

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(Drafting Office and Officer)

TOP SECRET - EXCLUSIVELY EYES ONLYDEPARTMENT OF STATEMemorandum of Conversation

Monday

DATE: October 15, 1973

PLACE: The Secretary
of State's Office

TIME: 4:35 p.m.-5:15 p.m.

SUBJECT:

PARTICIPANTS: Secretary of State Henry Kissinger
 Winston Lord, Director, Planning and Coordination State
 Arthur Hummel, Acting Assistant Secretary, Bureau of
 East Asian and Pacific Affairs
 Ambassador Huang Chen, Chief of the PRC Liaison Office
 Mr. Chien Ta-Yung, PRC Liaison Office
 Mr. Chi Chao Chu, Interpreter, PRC Liaison Office

~~COPIES TO:~~

Ambassador Huang: This is the first time that I am calling on you at the State Department. I am happy to do so.

The Secretary: We will throw most of these paintings away and get some non-socialist, non-realistic ones. (There was then a discussion in which the Ambassador promised the Secretary to give him one of his paintings, noting that he had also made a similar promise to Commerce Secretary Dent. The Secretary also apologized for getting the proposed dinner list for the Chinese October 19 dinner to the Liaison Office so late, noting that it was the result of administrative confusion. Two different people were working on the project, each thinking the other had sent the list over.)

I see the Ambassador has a message for me, or is it for Mr. Lord.

Ambassador Huang: (Pulling out a piece of paper.) I know you are very busy and I do not wish to take too much of your time. I have been instructed by Prime Minister Chou En-lai to convey the following to Mr. Secretary of State and to ask you to convey it as soon as possible to President Nixon (reading):

"On October 11 Prince Sihanouk sent a letter to Prime Minister Chou En-lai. Prince Sihanouk said in

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his letter to Prime Minister Chou En-lai that Prince Sihanouk's mother, Queen Kossamak has been ill for a long time and has not recovered. Prince Sihanouk said in his letter that his mother's only wish was for the mother and son to have a reunion before she dies, even if such a reunion would be a very short one.

"Recently the Queen Mother's health has turned somewhat for the better, and it is hoped that the Chinese can charter an Air France plane and use the Air France plane to bring the Queen Mother to China for rest and medical treatment.

"Prince Sihanouk asked Prime Minister Chou En-lai to ask President Nixon to use his influence with the Lon Nol regime so that Prince Sihanouk's mother may leave Phnom Penh and come to China for medical treatment.

"Prince Sihanouk undertakes not to make use of the Queen Mother as a means of political struggle and asks that this undertaking of his be conveyed to President Nixon."

And that is what I have been instructed by the Prime Minister to convey to you.

The Secretary: Well Mr. Ambassador, your message will be conveyed immediately to the President, and we will give you a formal answer, I hope tomorrow. But you can say in a preliminary way that we will treat any request from the Prime Minister, and especially one concerning humanitarian problems, with great sympathy. And we will use our influence to make it possible for her to rejoin her son. Of course, you understand we have to check in Phnom Penh first, but we will use our influence in that direction. We will let you know formally tomorrow.

Ambassador Huang: Thank you.

The Secretary: As long as you are here I might as well take advantage of your presence. I have two things. When I talked to the Vice Minister in New

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York he asked me for an assessment of the Iraqi coup last summer, and we asked our intelligence people to make an assessment. It tends to support the suspicion of the Vice Minister and I thought you might like to have it on a personal basis. (The Secretary handed the Ambassador Tab A.)

Ambassador Huang: Thank you. Yes, I know about the contents of your talk with the Vice Minister.

The Secretary: Secondly, I know General Scowcroft talked to you yesterday about what we are doing in the Middle East and we know you will not approve it.

Ambassador Huang: But certainly I have already reported it to my government.

The Secretary: We are not asking for your approval or support, but we thought that we had one common interest in this situation which is to prevent your northern ally from becoming a dominant country in this region, and we therefore believe that the immediate strategic objective for us has to be to prevent a victory for Soviet-supported arms. And in order to limit Soviet adventurism we have to demonstrate that we can intervene more rapidly than they can. This is aside from the merits of a local dispute.

After a cease-fire is achieved, we intend to pursue a very active and drastic diplomacy to bring about a restoration of Arab territory. But in order to do this we have to demonstrate that we are a factor to reckon with and it is not the Soviet Union that determines the shape of events. This is of importance to Iran and the other countries in this area. This is our basic strategy. The actual moves may be more complex.

Ambassador Huang: So far as I know Iran is expressing its firm support for the struggle of the Arabs.

Secretary Kissinger: A lot of people are expressing strong support but nevertheless they don't want the Soviet Union to dominate the area. (The Ambassador smiles). As long as we are strong a lot of people can say a lot of things under our protection.

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I once wrote before I was in this position that General de Gaulle was pursuing an anti-American policy under the protection of the American Strategic Air Command which was all right because his policy was not against our long-term interests.

Ambassador Huang: But we very much appreciate General de Gaulle's policy of national independence and sovereignty.

The Secretary: So do we. That's why I thought in the long term his interests and ours were parallel.

Ambassador Huang: And precisely because of this, that is why General de Gaulle firmly persisted in developing his own nuclear weapons.

The Secretary: We have no objection to that.
(The Ambassador laughs).

Ambassador Huang: On a personal basis, according to your intelligence, what weapons are the Soviet Union giving to the Arabs? Personally speaking, I doubt that they are giving very much because the support of the Soviet Union to the Arabs is always false support; in the past they forbade them to use the weapons. What kind of weapons are they providing - planes? tanks?

The Secretary: They are providing tanks and some MIG-21 airplanes.

Ambassador Huang: Personally speaking, I am skeptical about that.

The Secretary: You doubt that? You are skeptical about the quality airplane. Is that what you mean?

Ambassador Huang: In fact, I doubt whether they are really getting such weapons because in the past the Russians attempted to forbid the use of Russian weapons and to prevent them from fighting.

The Secretary: Well, they are giving them weapons now.

Ambassador Huang: Tanks and planes?

The Secretary: They're shipping some tanks now by

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ships. Their airplanes can't carry many tanks.

Ambassador Huang: You are doing that much faster; we heard you were sending planes and tanks.

The Secretary: This is a competition we can win. We can move our equipment much faster than the Soviet Union can move theirs.

Ambassador Huang: My attitude is very clear. I don't want to say very much. You can talk with the Prime Minister in Peking.

The Secretary: We just wanted you to understand our strategy. I think we have the same perspective from opposite ends of the spectrum. We are not asking for your approval. This is just giving you information.

Ambassador Huang: And I will cordially convey this to our government.

The Secretary: We will give you an answer tomorrow.

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